

Failure: The Curse of Leichhardt?

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What is it about failure and Leichhardt?

Nothing conclusive has ever been found to explain the failure of his 1848 expedition, yet the fascination continues. In his new book *Where is Dr Leichhardt?* Darrell Lewis traces all the fruitless search expeditions, including his own. Outlining the compulsive quests he comments that, given all the equipment Leichhardt took with him, you can't blame adventurers for thinking that *they'll* strike it lucky and find *something*.

What interests me is this: how have the macho heroes coped with the curse of becoming yet another Leichhardt failure?

West Australia's first Premier John Forrest blamed Aboriginal people he met. Their story of white men murdered in the desert directed his failed 1869 search. He claimed that on his return they told him the very same story about his own party being speared. He became a confirmed Leichhardt sceptic, but the rumours persisted.

Eighty-eight years later another West Australian politician, Bill Grayden, also found no traces of Leichhardt. But he refused to accept his failure. Instead he turned himself into a modern-day 'prophet from the desert' with a new 'understanding' of Aboriginal people in the 'remote Interior' and dedicated himself to their cause.

In July 1953, Grayden's expedition swept out of Perth in a convoy of borrowed government jeeps, bound for the remote Rawlinson Ranges in Ngaanyatjarra desert country, lured by rumours of a padlocked iron box of coins from Leichhardt's party. Grayden was thirty-three and a career politician with six years' war service that left him with a set of khaki uniforms for the journey. The most important member of the expedition was his Ngaanyatjarra guide, Mitawalinya, who Grayden met at Warburton Mission. Mitawalinya's contributions were leading through the rough terrain of his country and the unexpected significance of his kinship connections. The only fatality of the journey was the expedition's dog, Ludwig.

Grayden returned to Perth in early September, looking every inch the adventurer, with spears lashed to the side of his jeep but, alas, without Leichhardt's box. Instead he announced his interest in the Ngaanyatjarra desert people he had met.

This wasn't media spin: that Grayden changed during his desert sojourn is evident in his book *A Nomad was our Guide*.¹ Drawing on his diaries from the expedition he describes a transforming journey from the domesticity of Perth to a boy's own adventure in the white

man's outback and then into Mitawalinya's country. At this point Grayden briefly enters a new world and the network of Mitawalinya's family relations. Through him, Grayden meets Aboriginal people otherwise inaccessible to him, mainly small family groups camped separately near the same waterholes. Despite language differences things shift for Grayden. It is as if, following Helena Grehan citing Levinas, he is awoken by the "call of the other" to a state of "responsibility [...] like a cellular irritability."²

Grayden suddenly confesses that having seen "first-hand the plight of the Wongi³, we are beginning to think that we should be doing something to help instead of looking for an iron box."⁴ He cuts blankets into strips and teaches the mothers to sew them into rough shifts for their shivering children.

With Grayden trapped in a state akin to Grehan's "radical unsettlement",⁵ the frames of his text shift unsteadily, moving from anthropological interest in Aboriginal life; projections of his own feelings of fear and displacement; stereotypes of primitive savagery and of the noble savage; international post-war visions of equality and sameness; and imagined interventions of benevolence, assimilation and segregation. He discerns human similarities rather than racial anomalies and concludes that "surely the only differences of consequence between the Wongi and our own people are that the Wongi are brown and they live under arguably more difficult conditions." His final thoughts are of their "serenity and dignity," and how it "now seems a sacrilege that the Wongi and his society cannot be preserved."⁶

Back in Perth, Grayden's unsettled meditations quickly solidified into the benevolent white man's quest of helping and speaking for Aboriginal people. *His* political agendas took centre stage, and the vision of the Ngaanyatjarra people receded into the desert. Still, he managed to be controversial and very '1950s'. In 1955, Grayden led a parliamentary committee to investigate conditions in the Central Desert. He cited the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights and the suffering of refugee families. He attacked the Cold War paranoia of the planned British and Australian atomic tests at Maralinga. He questioned the resumption of Aboriginal reserve land for mining. He was a David taking on Goliath, and the response was a humiliating rebuttal from government, anthropologists, mining interests and even the fledgling Rupert Murdoch in Adelaide.

But it is in his 1957 film *Their Darkest Hour* with commentary by Pastor Doug Nichols that Grayden's new quest of helping Aboriginal people takes national stage, and plays out in what became known as the 'Warburton Range controversy'. Devastating images of Aboriginal destitution ignited passionate debate about government policy in remote Australia

and provided ammunition for the 1960s citizenship movement leading to the 1967 referendum.

It was some years before the flaws in Grayden's activism and the sorry consequences following his failure to find Leichhardt were dramatically exposed. In 2006, artists from the Warburton community participating in a national exhibition were unexpectedly confronted by footage from *Their Darkest Hour*. The film had never been shown to them although it was regularly shown in celebrations of the 1967 referendum. Its origins with the Ngaanyatjarra people had been forgotten. The artists expressed their "dumbfounded shock" and "*Kurnta* (shame)" at seeing their old people represented as "helpless suffering victims" and their communities as "marginal and unviable". In response they created a series of paintings titled *Nyakulayinyu Tarrka* or "looking until all that is left is the bones."⁷

Grayden's heroic reputation, earned thanks to his earlier Leichhardt inspired expedition, had already been tarnished by his embarrassing speeches during the Noonkanbah lands rights dispute. Now it was in tatters. Failure, the curse of Leichhardt, had finally caught up with him.⁸

Notes

¹ Grayden, William L. *A Nomad was our Guide: The Story of a Journey Through the Land of the Wongi – the Central Desert of Australia – 1953*. N.H. Holdings Publications South Perth, WA, 2002.

² Grehan, Helena. *Performing, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 13.

³ Wongi is the name for Aboriginal people of the western goldfields and desert areas of Western Australia,

⁴ Grayden, 146.

⁵ Grehan, 34.

⁶ Grayden, 127; 142.

⁷ McGrath, Pamela Faye and David Brooks. "*Their Darkest Hour: the films and photographs of William Grayden and the history of the 'Warburton Range controversy' of 1957.*" *Aboriginal History* 34 (2010): n.p.

⁸ For further reading, see Anna Haebich. *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*. North Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000.

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